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Liveability under shrinkage: initiatives in the ‘capital of pessimism’ in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on local initiatives and the agency of residents in the shrinking town of Puolanka in northern Finland. Structural opportunities and constraints shape individual and collective agency in the community, as they steer how people create and develop initiatives. We discuss how local initiatives impact the sense of place among those who would like to stay in their rural hometown. A group of local activists facetiously market Puolanka as the ‘most pessimistic town’ in the world, turning shrinkage, decay, and pessimism into the town’s brand. Beyond the pessimism brand several other initiatives, which are either created by engaged local residents or are municipality-led, are revitalizing and enhancing the liveability of Puolanka. By applying ethnographic research methods, we aim to show how initiatives improve the well-being and contribute to the place perception of residents. Such initiatives create jobs, albeit usually in small numbers, improve the physical space, stabilize the sense of community and can bring hope to a place characterized by increasing abandonment, decay, and the loss of local services.

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Introduction

‘Puolanka: Finland’s “best worst” dying town’, was the title of a lengthy article published by the BBC (Huusko 2019) about a small shrinking town in northern Finland. The article indicates how a group of local activists decided to ‘embrace being the worst’ and how the initiative of ‘Puolanka’s pessimist group’ gradually turned pessimism into a brand. The initiative now hosts an annual pessimism musical festival, runs a coffee house during the summer months and sells merchandise products marketing the place beyond the borders of the municipality. In addition, they make tongue-in-cheek YouTube videos, which have attracted thousands of viewers, that promote the ‘nothingness’ of the place in a humoristic way (Huusko 2019). The ‘Pessimists of Puolanka’ drive to the point of absurdity the general tendency in the media to show shrinking cities as dead places or problematic sites with a high level of deprivation. This reflects the stigma of ‘dying

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cities': places without resources inhabited by deprived people or the 'losers of society' who cannot escape (Bernt and Rink 2010).

The focus of this paper, however, is to demonstrate how various initiatives contribute to the place perception and well-being of communities. We want to draw attention to marginalized peripheral communities and show, through our ethnographic examples that there are always some active stayers – people who have consciously decided to stay in their hometowns despite the prevailing trend of outmigration to bigger cities, where there are more opportunities for jobs, education and leisure activities (also see Adams and Komu 2021). Residents of declining, peripheral towns struggle with outmigration, loss of local services and facilities and are trying to make their communities more viable by creating initiatives. This article sheds light on local initiatives in the context of a northern Finnish town, while emphasizing that this case study can be fruitful in understanding rural, shrinking towns globally. The initiatives of Puolanka could serve as an inspiration for similar towns, to make themselves more liveable and viable. While we acknowledge the cultural differences and that all shrinking towns have their unique histories, we would urge city planners, architects and social scientists to undertake a more diverse discussion on the roles of local initiatives.

In the academic literature on shrinking cities (Lazzeroni et al. 2013; Rizzo 2016; Wiechmann and Bontje 2015), aspects such as local cultures, community bonds, bottom-up initiatives and the associational life of communities get significantly less attention than economic, planning and material aspects of shrinkage (Ho and Douglass 2008, Kong 2009). Moreover, stayers in declining communities are often described as passive, powerless, and backward and are attached to negative stereotypes of being 'left behind' and 'disadvantaged' (Adams and Komu 2021; Jamieson 2000; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). Such associations influence the self-perception of local residents in a negative way. Interestingly, our research results show how, despite the decline, many local residents expressed their pride and sense of belonging to their (home)town. The engagement of local residents in various initiatives demonstrates the creative ways in which they contribute their personal and to the community's well-being.

When using the term 'liveability', we refer to the 'Global Liveability Index Report' by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU 2021), which analyses liveability through five qualitative and quantitative categories: stability, availability and quality of health care services, culture and local environment, education and infrastructure (including public transport, road network, water, energy and data provision).

We suggest understanding the concept of well-being in a pluralistic way, which engages different scholarly disciplines, age-classes, social and material environments (Smith and Reid 2018; Stammler, Adams, and Ivanova 2022). Fischer (2014) argues that well-being, across cultures, cannot be reduced to material conditions alone. In the context of viable, liveable towns well-being should have a prominent role because it can be useful to understand the meaning of local initiatives for individuals and communities.

With this article, we contribute to studies of community life in shrinking towns by engaging with conceptual frameworks of initiatives in declining towns. The case study examples demonstrate local residents' perceptions on what they consider as initiatives worth investing their time and resources in. Our research results add to a better

understanding of the ways local activists in declining communities are creating a more viable and liveable community. The overarching research question for this study revolved around the question of how initiatives contribute to local residents' lives and how the initiatives enhance the community's liveability.

Local initiatives in a shrinking town: a conceptual framework

The declining town of Puolanka exemplifies widespread processes of peripheralization and socio-spatial polarization (Kühn 2015). Due to uneven spatial development, many rural and urban communities across the globe continue to experience massive outmigration and a decline in liveability (Haase, Rink, and Grossmann 2016; Ringel 2018). The number of spatially disadvantaged localities is increasing in many countries, including Finland. Declining communities undergo a decrease in investments and state support, service cutbacks in public infrastructures, such as schools, health services and public transport, caused by the need to cut costs of maintaining an oversized infrastructure (e.g. Cowell, Gainsborough, and Lowe 2016; LaFrombois, Park, and Yurcaba 2019). Such processes intensify decay. Bontje and Musterd (2012) define such shrinking of towns through a decrease in the local or regional labour force and an increase of older age groups, which is often intertwined with economic stagnation or decline.

There are various material and social consequences of decay in shrinking towns, that are also visible in the case of Puolanka, that is, abandonment and vacancy, deteriorated buildings, spatial marginalization, accelerated ageing and the loss of the working-age and well-educated population (Haase et al. 2014). Most studies on shrinkage are conducted from the planning perspective, where the emphasis is often put on economic and physical considerations, particularly infrastructure, urban services and economic growth (Hollander et al. 2009).

The literature on agency in regional and local development focuses on mechanisms and policies that stimulate regional economic restructuring, with a particular emphasis on the notion of path development (Isaksen et al. 2019). In a study of regional development paths, Grillitsch and Sotarauta (2020) explore why some regions with similar structural preconditions grow differently than others. They focus on agentic processes in regional growth paths analysing the interplay between structural forces and the local use of opportunities. Both history and perceived futures influence agentic processes and shape regional development paths. The authors name innovative entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship and place-based leadership as the main drivers of regional structural change (Grillitsch and Sotarauta 2020; van Grunsven and Hutchinson 2016). Change agency is crucial to regional path development processes, which prompts the key question of how agency in local processes varies over time in different regional contexts. Jolly, Grillitsch, and Hansen (2020) develop a framework for understanding the role of multiple types of actors and the agency they exercise for regional industrial path development, while Beer, Barnes, and Horne (2021) emphasize the interaction affects in shaping regional transformations through perspectives of path creation and adjustments. Benner (2022) urges us, by combining quantitative and qualitative methods, to sharpen our understanding which changes in agency patterns and practices are inducing path transformations.

The holistic concept of liveability was earlier predominantly used by city authorities, planners and policymakers in indexes aggregating city characteristics for comparing and ranking different cities. Such indexes combine measurement of physical-environmental qualities and cultural dimensions of cities (Balsas 2004; Jomehpour 2015; Onnom 2018; Maghsoodi Tilaki et al. 2014; Wyatt 2009; Yassin 2019). There are also policy-oriented indexes, e.g. OECD's regional well-being index, which measures how different regions perform in education, environment, safety and other components of well-being (OECD 2022).

Recently researchers have criticized such indexes and suggested shifting away from ranking and rethinking the concept of liveability (Kashef 2016; Paul and Sen 2020). The attention is shifted to the social (subjective) dimension of liveability, linked to the community, social interaction and social cohesion (Lloyd, Fullagar, and Reid 2016). Gradually, a more interdisciplinary perspective of liveability is developed, which is more centred upon local social lives and associated urban spatial practices, emphasizing the importance of individual and collective human lived experiences of liveability (e.g. Bunnell and Kathiravelu 2016).

Processes of decline inevitably affect the liveability of communities. In many of them a strong sense of resignation and powerlessness is developing (Mah 2012; Ringel 2018). For some local people, material and economic losses are accompanied by a loss of dignity and self-worth. Local people in shrinking communities often experience stigmatization and encounter negative images of their home places. People feel 'left behind' because they reside in places that 'do not matter' (Rodríguez-Pose 2018). As result, many residents of different ages view the possibility to move out positively. Social science studies in the past focused mostly on the processes of outmigration, paying less attention to people who stay immobile in declining towns, thus neglecting the countervailing structural and personal forces that restrict or resist 'drivers' of migration and lead to different immobility outcomes (Schewel 2020). Recently many researchers have switched the focus to non-migrants or those who stay put (Fernandez-Carro and Evandrou 2014; Gray 2011; Hjälml 2014; Mata-Codesal 2015; Preece 2018). They rethink immobility and see staying as an active process, in which stayers are considered not as passive observers of their fates, but as active participants of their own fate (Adams and Komu 2021; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018).

The process of staying is as nuanced and diverse as the process of migrating and the decision to stay is made multiple times over an individual's life course (Hjälml 2014; Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). This decision is made under a particular combination of structural influences on the agency of actors who may respond to the same forces in different ways. The processes, experiences and perceptions of staying depend largely on the degree of (in)voluntariness. Immobility can be experienced both as a burden or as an achievement (Mata-Codesal 2015).

The recent shift to public participation and engagement of citizens in urban governance happens more often in fast-developing cities while shrinking towns are sometimes lacking civic involvement and active public participation (Hollander 2018). Such initiatives improve physical space, stabilize the sense of community, create jobs, albeit usually in small numbers and can bring hope to the communities. Successful development of local initiatives is often a result of effective leadership, which plays a very important role in the continuing shaping and re-shaping of place. Strong local leaders, both

formal and informal, help communities to adapt to and exploit the opportunities afforded by the changing social and economic circumstances (Collinge, Gibney, and Mabey 2010).

A good example of these processes is shown in the work of Kimberly Kinder (2016): ‘DIY Detroit: Making Do in a City Without Services’. Kinder (2016) describes how active residents in Detroit are seeking to ‘manage’ their city through small (but time-consuming) acts of service. She demonstrates their agency and creativity without ignoring the structural constraints under which they operate and the significant gap between the potential of individual actions and much-needed systemic change. The focus is on three categories of this DIY urbanism: managing the effects of widespread vacancy (trying to find buyers, protecting vacant buildings from vandalism and decay and repurposing abandoned land), performing public services (caretaking and policing) and producing local knowledge (surveying and tracking ownership). Leetmaa et al. (2015) demonstrate with case studies from shrinking towns in Estonia and Germany how the social capital of local stakeholders becomes important in planning strategies in finding specific niches that depend on active local agency.

Focusing on local initiatives and the local residents’ perceptions on initiatives in Puolanka, we follow Kinder (2016) and Ho and Douglass (2008), who argue that liveability should not be reduced solely to the material or economic wealth of cities and that more attention should be paid to the social relations, community life and human agency needed to make a town liveable for various social groups.

Methodology

The research for this article was conducted as part of the project ‘Enhancing liveability of small shrinking cities through co-creation’ (LISH), realized by three partner universities in Finland, Russia and Germany in 2021–2022.¹ The project investigates and compares several small shrinking towns in different contexts, aiming to contribute to a better understanding of processes of decline, as well as co-creation and placemaking efforts. Focusing on local initiatives, we explore how local residents’ self-respect and self-determined solutions can be enhanced.

A range of qualitative methods was used in this study: unstructured and semi-structured interviews, participant observations and the analysis of secondary sources (Flick 2006). The data used for this article has been collected during four fieldwork visits between June 2021 and August 2022.

The interview questions centred around the topics important for local actors: what factors of local initiatives were important from their viewpoints, the reasons why they had chosen to live in Puolanka and how they perceived life in a shrinking town. While some interviews were arranged beforehand through contacting people, other conversations took place more spontaneously during the field stays. We interviewed voluntary participants in different locations in the municipality in places where they felt most comfortable talking to us: at residents’ homes, at the initiatives’ centres/houses, in the town hall, on nature trails, at our guesthouse and in the tourism centre *Paljakka* near the town. The duration of the interviews usually ranged between 30 minutes and 2 hours. Some of the contacts we approached through personal connections, other people we met by chance in town and some interlocutors we located through residents who directed us

to their acquaintances, friends or family members. This kind of snowball sampling technique is appropriate for ethnographic research because it allows to establish informal contacts with people who were willing to connect us with their own social networks. Moreover, the method of snowballing enabled us to quickly find people, willing to meet us for an interview, as we were recommended through people who already had a personal relationship with. In recent years response rates to academic surveys have been decreasing (Dusek, Yurova, and Ruppel 2015) and therefore this method provided us with interlocutors we may not have reached through other channels. While we acknowledge that this method may have excluded some participants, we emphasize that this method works well for the 'hidden' part of the population (Dusek, Yurova, and Ruppel 2015), that is, those whom we aimed to reach in order to get a diverse overview of the community.

In addition, observations were one of our key research methods (Bernard 2006; Robben and Sluka 2012). We conducted these mostly at local public places, such as, an art gallery, shops, pubs, cafes, restaurants, hotels and hiking trails around nature sites. In all of these places, we conducted informal conversations with people willing to converse with us, gathering information about aspects of local life. The participants were aged between 16 and 85 years. Some of them were well-travelled cosmopolitans who had moved many times during their life course, while others had always lived in Puolanka. Some had returned to Puolanka after spending years elsewhere in Finland or abroad and others had moved to the town for work or because of family ties.

Before starting an interview or conversation, we explained the aim and content of our project to interlocutors and told them that they could at any time refrain from being part of this study by contacting us. We were mindful that our informants' identities had been anonymized and paid special attention to emphasizing the voluntary nature of participation. We considered the risks and vulnerabilities of conducting fieldwork in a small town, where people know each other very well and were cautious about not sharing specific information about our interviewees within the community. We were surprised by the openness and willingness of the people to participate in this research throughout the project. The municipality officials were helpful and devoted time to meet with us when we required information. Throughout the entire research, local residents, as well as leaders and participants of the initiatives, were engaged actively in sharing their views and devoted their time to meeting with us. Altogether we conducted 42 interviews with different stakeholders: activists, entrepreneurs, local residents and representatives of local officials.

The interviews were recorded and stored in accordance with to the project's data management plan. The data analysis followed a process of manually classifying and interpreting the material through open coding of field notes, jottings, logs and interview transcripts (see Bernard 2006).

The shrinking town of Puolanka

The effort to brand Puolanka as the 'capital of pessimism' has brought some unforeseen fame to the town. Puolanka is a small Finnish municipality in the Kainuu region, which is marketed by the municipality as the 'Arctic Lakeland of Finland' and is characterized by pristine lakesides, dense forests, montane areas, snowy winters and 'peaceful nature'

(Regional Council of Kainuu 2021). ‘Wilderness’ might indeed be the prevailing image of this rural area with no industry and sparse settlement. With a municipal area of some 2600 square kilometres and only around 2500 permanent residents, the population density of shrinking Puolanka has dropped below one person per square kilometre (Statistics Finland 2021). In the 1960s Puolanka had its peak population with around 7500 residents (Municipality of Puolanka 2021). Puolanka seems to indeed be one of the ‘the fastest dying towns in Finland’, with 40% of the population being over 64 years of age and the share of under 15-year-olds being less than 10% (Statistics Finland 2021). Only around half of the people live in the town centre, with the rest scattered around in smaller village areas. The presence of nature and the small village areas with village associations are important initiatives for both local residents as well as seasonal residents who own holiday homes. The village associations are active in organizing smaller events, taking care of cemeteries and providing help during weather extremes.

In 2020 Puolanka reportedly had around 1500 holiday homes with around 2300 seasonal residents – almost as many as permanent inhabitants (Statistics of Finland 2021). According to the municipality leaders, the SARS-COVID-19 pandemic led to a doubling of residents in the area, which was analysed through the mobile data traffic. The municipality has invested in a fibre-optic network to increase internet stability in the area and thus, make Puolanka attractive for remote workers.

Despite sparse settlements and population numbers, the municipality offers a surprisingly wide range of services, such as basic health care, an elderly home, day-care, a primary and upper-secondary school as well as an active ‘adult education centre’ (*kansalaisopisto*) with a variety of courses. Also provided are, possibilities for many sports and outdoor activities with skiing and trekking trails, outdoor exercise stairs, a sports field and a skating rink, which was recently covered. Local attractions include Paljakka, a tourism centre with holiday villas, a hotel, trekking routes, biking trails, cross-country tracks and downhill skiing slopes, and *Hepoköngäs*, a scenic waterfall. Cultural activities offered in Puolanka are diverse considering the size of the town: a museum of local history, an art house, a cinema project, two summer theatres offering annual shows and an annual heavy metal festival ‘Lankafest’. In addition, Puolanka has its own weekly newspaper providing the residents with specific local information (Municipality of Puolanka 2021). Other services such as petrol stations, two grocery stores, a bank, a restaurant, a grill kiosk, a flower shop, a hardware store, a book shop, a public library and a church show that the town still has a great deal to offer. On the other hand, the empty, decaying buildings in the town centre speak of services that have withered. ‘There is nothing here’, many of the young people in Puolanka would say, yet the older residents often commented how they could ‘find everything that they need and the rest is only a drive away’. Commuting between towns is indeed a big part of everyday life for many of Puolanka’s residents, as 23% of the locals work outside the municipality (Statistics of Finland 2020).

The main employer in Puolanka is the municipality itself which runs most of the services, with a private health care provider (*Terveystalo*) following as the second-largest employer (Municipality of Puolanka 2021). The health care and social services sector in fact accounts for around one-quarter of all jobs and entrepreneurship related to agriculture remains another key source of livelihood (Statistics of Finland 2020). Dairy farms are especially important, as Puolanka has been a top producer of milk nationally

(Municipality of Puolanka 2021). The other economic activity in Puolanka takes place in rather small businesses and the only comparatively large factory, which produced motor-cycling gear, was shut down around 20 years ago. Indeed, Puolanka along with neighbouring municipalities in the region has been suffering from a lack of jobs, as recent unemployment has risen to 13.8% of the workforce, the national average being around 10.7% (Statistics of Finland 2020). There has been a slightly positive trend in the employment rate during recent years, but it can be explained by the decreasing number of working-age people in the area, rather than an increase in the number of jobs. The jobs have decreased by 36% in the past 20 years, while the number of working-age people has decreased by 40% (Statistics Finland 2020).

Initiatives by the local municipality: 'a glimmer of hope'?

The analysis of our data shows that the local initiatives can be divided into two categories: initiatives led by the local municipality and initiatives organized by local activists. Often these initiatives are intertwined and bolster each other by parallel use of infrastructures and the exchange of ideas, while at times the privately organized initiatives feel that they do not get sufficient support from the municipality, especially financial support. On the one hand, the municipality's initiatives are an important contribution to keeping and making the town liveable for its residents, while on the other hand, the viability of a town relies on the creative initiatives of individuals. From the perspective of local residents, viable towns need a selection of different activities that correspond to the needs of individuals. In the academic literature, the kinds of services provided by the municipalities are often included in development research and framed into the 'cultural economy' discussion (Lazzeroni et al. 2013), which aims at analysing local development models and connections between heritage and cultural strategies. By paying more attention to community life and human agency, as Ho and Douglass (2008) suggest, we discuss in the following the meaning of these initiatives from the perspective of local residents.

One important initiative by Puolanka's municipality was to invest in the local health care services. Our research results show that regardless of local residents' intentions to stay or leave Puolanka, they were highly satisfied with the quality of local health services, which stands quite in contrast to the other towns in the region of Kainuu (THL 2020). We did not specifically ask our interlocutors about local healthcare and were surprised by how frequently residents brought up the topic of healthcare services. Hence, the high quality of health services is one of the key factors of well-being in a declining place with an ageing population. This initiative, regardless of age, status and gender, was perceived as 'beneficial' for all residents. Both the municipal leaders and the residents of Puolanka have regarded their privatized health care system as a better option for maintaining a high-quality service level in a rural town (also see Heikkonen 2021; Kyllönen 2013; Niskanen 2017).

The basic healthcare services in Puolanka are bought from a private health care provider (*Terveystalo*), which is a unique arrangement in Finland as the country is undergoing a reform of health care, social welfare and rescue services (*SOTE-uudistus*) in which the responsibility for organizing these services will be transferred from municipalities to well-being services counties starting from 2023 (*SOTE-uudistus* 2022). During the years 2005–2012 Puolanka participated in a similar system with seven other

municipalities, as the Kainuu region went through a self-government experiment, testing the rescaling of municipal services to the regional level. The system has been mostly regarded as successful in the light of health care service provision and expenditure (Haveri, Airaksinen, and Jäntti 2015). Puolanka did not agree to continue the experiment but instead decided to privatize its own basic health care services, and purchase special health care services from the regional joint provider of the remaining municipalities in Kainuu.

In addition to its superior health care provision, the municipality administration has developed and executed a number of initiatives in recent years for the benefit of the community. Giving the declining numbers of residents, some of the investments are substantial and only possible through external and governmental investments. For example, a biogas plant was built to generate energy from waste that potentially can provide the entire town with thermal energy for heating the houses and water. Furthermore, the municipality invested in building a modern sports hall at the school premises that can be used for multiple purposes. Recently, a roof was put on the local ice rink to prolong the outdoor skating season. In addition, hundreds of kilometres of skiing, biking and hiking trails are being maintained, which significantly enhances local residents' well-being and positive perception of Puolanka. Our interlocutors often described the place as a 'haven for outdoor activities', including hunting, fishing, hiking, cross-country skiing and biking opportunities.

The municipality also invests in cultural events by employing a full-time worker to coordinate concerts and children and family activities. Even a local metal music festival (Lankafest 2022) is hosted annually through the support of the municipality administration. These kinds of initiatives enhance the liveability of the town by enabling local small businesses to actively engage with the community and improve sales in the process. Moreover, these kinds of cultural events promote the town to outsiders and increase its visibility. Yet, these investments do not mean that local residents would all equally benefit from them or use all the services provided. Moreover, some initiatives run by individual activists feel disadvantaged because they need to find funds and do not get so much support from the local administration.

Like in to other declining towns in rural Finland, Puolanka's municipality officials are concerned with young people moving away. In order to tackle the issue of young people leaving the municipality came up with a strategy designed to attract young residents to stay. The benefits for young students in the local upper-secondary school, include free schoolbooks, laptop, a free access to the local gym, free access to the local skiing centre's slopes in Paljakka, subsidized living in shared or single apartments and even a subsidized driver's licence. The benefits are quite significant in money for families and for the young people themselves. However, most young people still consider moving away to larger cities with more opportunities:

Nothing can save this place, only a miracle, but I cannot think of what that miracle could be. Older people wonder why the young people want to leave Puolanka but they have seen the place much livelier and bigger in their own youth.² (Young female, student of upper-secondary school)

At the time of our research, only four students had remained in the graduating class of the local upper-secondary school, which indicates the prevailing culture of young people

migrating from rural to more urban locations (Farrugia 2016; Komu and Adams 2021). Moreover, this example shows that some initiatives, even though well-intended, will not always lead to the desired outcome. Rautio and Lanas (2013) argue that successful lives tend to be defined through material possessions, economic growth, social connections and increasing mobility – an approach that emphasizes living standards that are measured by domestic products (220). Interestingly, even though the material means would be provided for young people by the local authorities, it is not sufficient enough to keep the young people in the community. Opportunities for higher education or a broad variety of urban services cannot be offered in a shrinking town.

Young people leaving to pursue education were also supported by the majority of older residents of Puolanka, yet, they were worried whether the young people would return. Rönnlund (2019) reminds us how young people will not stay in their rural hometowns because of the spatial constructions even though they feel deeply connected to the place. However, it is important to acknowledge that some of our interlocutors who had left Puolanka at some point, had returned at a later stage of their lives. The perspective on a place can change over time (also see Leyshon 2008), which became apparent especially in the group of young families, who considered Puolanka to be a safe and good place to raise their children. During the time of our research, the municipality built a new day-care centre, which was opened in the town centre, by the lake in August 2022.

The initiatives aiming at providing activities for youth in the area, could imply that the viability of a town is connected to the success in keeping young people from leaving. Rural development, however, does not necessarily have to be framed in terms of keeping young generations from moving. Our next examples show how initiatives manage to increase the liveability of the area for older people in addition of creating ways on how to attract younger people.

It is evident that the municipality invests generously in building new infrastructures, that also partly help to support initiatives. However, the municipality would not be known so well outside of its borders without the investment of creativity, time and economic resources in bottom-up initiatives. In the following, we discuss the engagement of local residents and their acquaintances in initiatives that are not part of the municipality's agenda but add substantially to the diversity and variety of life in Puolanka.

Bottom-up initiatives: virtue or vice?

In Puolanka, as in many other shrinking localities, there are a number of bottom-up initiatives led by local activists. The discussion of such initiatives in small shrinking towns is widely neglected in academic debates. Most studies focus on broader city planning and policy-making strategies (Ivanov 2021; Panagopoulos and Barreira 2012; Yuanping et al. 2021) instead of analysing what initiatives local people are already running to enhance their own well-being.

The motives for starting local initiatives range from personal interests (for example art, history and handicrafts) to creative ways to sustain an income (the project of Puolanka's pessimists). The outcome of these bottom-up initiatives enhances not only well-being of the individuals initiating the project but contributes to the collective liveability of the town. Projects initiated by local residents are usually run by a small group of people with common values and needs. These initiatives are mostly apolitical, aimed

at small improvements in living conditions at the local level and providing important alternatives to enhance local well-being. People have different reasons to start initiatives, for some, it might be the importance of staying and the fondness for rural place-based attributes and family ties (also see Morse and Mudgett 2018). Other studies have noted that having a positive social life in rural places, to which local initiatives widely contribute, may outweigh the negative impact of the sparse and distant services (Stockdale and Haartsen 2018). Neil Thin (2016) calls for an understanding of well-being as the result of people's dynamic interactions with places, an insight which can readily be seen in our case study examples.

In Puolanka there is a wide range of local initiatives, organizations and associations, doing valuable work for the residents. For example, hunting associations are highly valued and are a significant contribution to local culture. There are village associations that offer activities and services (such as taking care of the graves or help in extreme weather conditions) that are significant for the well-being of the people living in these remote communities:

One important part of living here is the communality. I feel that in the villages we take care of each other in a positive way, not in a gossiping way. We help each other if there is a need despite the decline of 'village culture' (...) A few years ago there was a very snowy winter and lots of trees got damaged in the forest. We had power cuts for days. The municipality approached the village association and on a Sunday we went to check all the houses in two villages. (Active member of a village association)

In addition, a variety of sports initiatives, church activities (they offer a wide range of services for all age groups), pensioners clubs and cultural events are vital for keeping a town liveable and attractive. We have selected three examples of bottom-up initiatives, which we discuss in the following. These initiatives are located in different buildings in the town centre, which highlights the importance of a concrete place where the initiatives can flourish. A concrete physical place is not only a material manifestation of an active initiative but also has a representative role for the group of activists in the community.

House of handicrafts: 'this is our hospital and therapy'

Some 10–15 people gather regularly in an old, wooden house in the town centre to produce a variety of handicrafts by using traditional techniques of knitting, crocheting, weaving, stitching, embroidering and sewing. The products can be purchased in the shop, located in the same house. It attracts visitors and locals, while simultaneously serving as a place for the local handicraft enthusiasts to maintain their social relations within the community; it creates the feeling of belonging to a group/community:

This place is our hospital and therapy. This is the place where we share our joys and sorrows. Here I also get to meet new people. (elderly female resident)

Preserving and passing on the traditional handicraft skills is not only meant to serve the active group members in enhancing their well-being but has a wider impact on keeping the cultural heritage alive. Some of the items have been innovatively refashioned to meet the needs of the 'modern consumer'.

The house was almost shut down by the municipality due to fire regulations, yet the people running the activities managed to collect around 500 names for a petition, and

negotiate with the municipality to keep the house open (Kurtti 2021). Such active support of the whole community for an initiative run by a small group of local enthusiasts demonstrates how local initiatives play an important role in place attachment and how individuals get personally involved, investing time, effort and energy to keep a place alive. This type of active engagement results in not only preserving a house representing the local cultural heritage but passing on the knowledge of traditional handicrafts to the next generations. However, the benefit comes at a cost; the cost of personal involvement that often leaves the activists tired because of the ‘seemingly endless work that needs to be done’ (middle-aged male activist). In the case of the handicraft initiative, it was difficult to find new, young people willing to pass on the skills of making traditional handicrafts. The average age of participants reflects Puolanka’s general demography, where young people are mostly absent and the pensioners are the most active participants. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the initiative creates a meaningful and important place for those who participate in the activities.

House of Isa Asp: keeping a female poet’s legacy alive

Keeping the initiative of legacy of Isa Asp (1853–1872), a young, female poet, alive, is a distinctive example, of how personal engagement and enthusiasm can lead to preserving an old heritage house and bring a memorial to a place (Isa Asp association 2019). After the statue of Isa Asp was brought to the town, the initiative has hosted local artists’ exhibitions and provides summer jobs for local youth in running the place during the summer months.

In a five-year project to get a statue of the poet Isa Asp, the leading activists mobilized to visit different stakeholders around the country and managed to pull both local and national strings for their cause to commission the statue from an artist. This initiative, according to the activists, received little support, and even opposition from the municipal administration. The initiative had to raise the financial means, invest time and personal resources to get the statue that has since become an important place in the town where graduating upper-secondary school students gather to celebrate.

In this light, it can be argued that local initiatives can impact the life of a community in unexpected ways and add value for groups in the community that the initiative did not initially target. We agree in this sense with Ho and Douglass (2008), who highlight that placemaking efforts of small groups of local residents influence social relations and community life in general in making the town more inclusive and diverse. The goals of those involved in the initiative did not include creating a place for young people to celebrate, yet, seeing the initiative through yielded a new place for local residents to gather.

House of pessimists

The initiative of the Pessimist group started around 2010 as a small cultural event for local people. A choir was formed to sing humoristic songs and riddles and poems were read out to an audience who was willing to listen. Over the years the event attracted more and more people and gained popularity even outside the town. After some years the initiative almost disappeared as the founding members stopped organizing events and did not have a vision of how to continue. This example demonstrates how initiatives

can start and cease as they are heavily reliant on the input and effort of individuals who commit time and skills to run the activities.

The pessimism activity was boosted again as part of the *ePuolanka* project, which undertook to create a brand for the town out of the pessimism movement and a more unified advertising strategy to boost local tourism (Municipality of Puolanka 2015). A man who had moved back to his hometown was hired as a coordinator for the project. He produced humorous and facetiously promotional videos for Puolanka that gained popularity on YouTube. Two huge billboards were also put up on the highways leading to Puolanka with the text: 'Next town is Puolanka, you still have time to turn around'³ and 'Are you lost? Next town, Puolanka'.

Eventually, the coordinator took over the Pessimism initiative and began developing the 'pessimism' idea further into a business by creating a cultural event (summer musical) and a range of merchandise, including shirts, posters, postcards, cups and sweets around the topic of pessimism. The Pessimist association bought an old, dilapidated house, located on the main road, which was previously owned by the local sports club. The house, where a local entrepreneur runs a café during the summer months, is decorated with outsized letters on the outer wall saying 'House of Pessimism' (*pessimismitalo*) and has become one of the main attractions of Puolanka.

Although these humoristic attempts try to market the place and make statements of 'nothingness', for the people behind such initiatives it enhances the quality of life, for the pessimisms musical and the videos have also managed to attract many young people to take part in the initiative. Some of them had previously moved to other cities for studies and work but return to Puolanka for while the musical shows are running.

While not all residents are happy about the branding of their hometown as the 'capital of pessimism', the initiative has brought the shrinking town of Puolanka into attention beyond the borders of Finland. In this light, we argue that local initiatives can play an important role in bringing issues of declining towns to the attention of a wider audience. By promoting the image of decay and loss over various social media channels, they address the concerns of people living in rural areas. These pro-active individuals invest time, energy, creativity and funds that at times seem to exceed their own limits. Therefore, our findings are twofold: On the one hand, we acknowledge the importance of local initiatives for the liveability of declining towns and its residents; on the other, our results show that the resources of individuals are limited. Local initiatives would need and wish for support, especially from the municipalities, which could distribute funds.

Conclusion

We have discussed the importance of specific initiatives shaping local residents perception of place and enhancing their individual well-being in the northern Finnish town of Puolanka. This case study can be fruitful in understanding rural, shrinking towns globally as examples showing how to make a declining town more viable and liveable. While we acknowledge the cultural differences of other similar places and that all towns have their unique histories, we urge city planners, architects and social scientists to engage in a more diverse discussion on the role of initiatives for communities.

The ethnographic examples of initiatives from Puolanka show how active individuals contribute through their creativity, effort and time in creating a liveable town for all of its citizens. While municipality-led initiatives are often designed to benefit a larger group of people, bottom-up initiatives rely on the personal investment and interest of individuals. Not all initiatives benefit all residents uniformly and not everyone feels connected to all initiatives within their hometown. However, the importance of support in the form of labour, finances, spaces and encouragement for all kinds of initiatives, which all have a different public, is vital for the diversity and liveability of the town. Moreover, we agree with Vainikka (2012, 588) that diverging spatial attachments and identities of people may simultaneously exist in various institutions, which are constructed along with normative identity discourses. We argue that the different initiatives together add to the viability of a town and thus provide options for participation for those who have chosen to stay.

Negative narratives about declining towns commonly produced in the media inform public perceptions about such places and contribute to the loss of dignity and self-worth of local residents. With this study, we have shown how local initiatives provide an alternative to the passive narrative of shrinking towns through active residents who improve their physical space and stabilize the sense of community. Moreover, the different houses used by the initiatives of pessimists, handicrafts and artists/poets enhance cultural activities, while simultaneously protecting and conserving the local cultural heritage and old buildings. Our examples show how the initiatives have turned decaying buildings into attractive, quality places that gather people for activities. Much like to those running the initiatives in Detroit (Kinder 2016), the people of Puolanka have mobilized the resources of friends, family members and acquaintances to accomplish the work needed for successful initiatives. Those social interactions revived collective systems of mutuality, reciprocity and belonging (Kinder 2016, 7).

Our findings highlight that a declining town, which has been branded as the ‘capital of pessimism’, turns out to be a vibrant place, in which a number of local initiatives are actively contributing to creating a vital community. We need to acknowledge that not all shrinking towns aim at a large increase in the number of residents but rather can be active in providing services for the remaining residents:

It is not a problem that people are moving away. We do not aim to be a town with a huge number of inhabitants, but we aim at making this a good place for those residents who are here. (Municipality employee, local resident)

In the academic discussion of rural regional development, we urge that more attention be paid to local initiatives in small, shrinking towns, that is, bottom-up initiatives addressing local needs. Furthermore, there is a need for more contributions focusing on the interactions between local administrations and bottom-up initiatives.

Our contribution adds to the academic discussion on not merely perceiving declining towns as places of decay and loss, in need of constant revitalization. On the contrary, the case of Puolanka shows how local people themselves are active citizens in their hometown, creating initiatives that go beyond the discourse of a pessimistic view of shrinkage. In this spirit, we conclude that the ‘capital of pessimism’ with its creativity and variety of initiatives enhances not only local residents’ well-being but rightfully attracts attention from research and beyond.

Notes

1. ERA.NET PLUS program, project reference RUS_ST2019-157. Due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, collaboration with the Russian partners has been suspended.
2. All interview quotes translated from Finnish by the authors.
3. Billboard texts translated from Finnish by the authors.

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